

CROWDED PRISONS

A new study shows that Alabama's prison system has the worst overcrowding of 16 Southern states. The system contains far more prisoners than its facilities were designed to hold. The figures below show design capacities and prisoner populations as of October for major corrections facilities as well as facilities in central Alabama.

	Designed capacity	Avg. monthly population	Occupancy rate
All major institutions	10,416	20,740	199.1%
Kilby	440	1,337	303.9%
Tutwiler	545	900	165.1%
Bullock	611	1,312	214.7%
Draper	600	1,231	205.2%
Staton	508	1,375	270.7%
Elmore	600	1,175	195.8%
Frank Lee	104	257	247.1%
Red Eagle	104	255	245.2%
In-House Total	12,388	23,578	190.3%

Source: Alabama Corrections Department

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CROWDING AND STAFFING

Prison approach invites disaster

It should come as a surprise to anyone familiar with the state's prison system that Alabama has more overcrowding in its prisons than any other Southern state.

It also should surprise no one that Alabama has more prisoners per corrections officer than any other Southern state.

What should surprise Alabamians is that the Alabama Corrections Department has managed to get by for several years without a major violent incident.

According to a recently released Southern Legislative Conference report, Alabama last among 16 SLC member states when it comes to prison overcrowding.

October prison statistics indicate that Alabama's traditional prisons, work release centers, work centers and boot camps were built to hold 12,388 inmates, but as of that month the facilities held 23,578 inmates, or more than 190 percent of capacity. Other inmates were still being held in county jails, helping to bring the total number of states inmates in custody in 26,220.

Alabama's crowding easily eclipses overcrowding figures for the other states, with North Carolina second at 112 percent of capacity and a regional average of 97 percent of capacity.

Alabama also had the highest prisoner to guard ratio with 9.8 prisoners for every corrections officer. The regional average was 5.5 inmates per guard.

Either of those statistics should be troubling, but the combination could prove just plain dangerous. Crowding far more inmates into facilities than the facilities are designed to hold is dangerous enough, but also putting far fewer corrections officers than needed to guard them seems a formula for disaster.

It is interesting to note that the Southern Legislative Conference report shows that North Carolina - which was second to Alabama in crowding - compensated by having the lowest ratio of inmates to guards, with 3.3 inmates for each guard.

Assume for argument's sake that Alabama continues to ignore its underfunding of its corrections system, and that the state is lucky and avoids a major incident of violence. It is still only a matter of time until the federal courts step in and order some relief from the current conditions.

So what should the state do?

- It could build more prisons, but there is no money for either the construction of new facilities or for their operation. There also is strong competition for available funding from other programs such as Medicaid or health needs. And there appears to be little legislative support for additional spending to operate more prisons.

- It could increase treatment programs and expand community corrections programs into more communities. But this also takes money, although it probably could be done at lower cost than traditional prison time.

- It should hire more corrections officers. This needs to be done regardless of whatever other approach is taken.

- It could modify its criminal laws to lower sentences. This would not be a popular solution; the public likes the idea of being tough on crime. Being tough is fine, but only if the state is willing to pay for that approach with adequate prison funding.

The SLC report shows that Alabama's average sentence length for inmates of 6.5 years is higher than the 5.1 average for Southern states. Alabama's average time served of 3.5 years is also higher than the SLC average of 2.7 years.

Frankly, it probably will take some combination of the above approaches to bring Alabama's prison statistics closer to the norm for the region. But unless something is done, the state will only continue to court disaster.

ON THE WEB

To see the full Southern Legislative Conference report, go to:
www.scatlanta.org/CDR.htm

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GOOD MORNING, GOVERNOR

It is not a politically popular issue, but reform of the state's corrections system to reduce crowding and improve safety and working conditions for corrections officers should be a higher priority for your administration.